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Sino-Indian Ties

20th Century Borders for Stable 21st Century Relations

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The Chinese seem to be either testing the waters or ratcheting up the dispute over, either the whole of Arunachal Pradesh or part of it with their recent string of pronouncements on the subject, starting with the statement of the Chinese Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi. The Chinese have never been quite explicit on how much of Arunachal they seek. In a travel agent's office in Lhasa, for example, I saw an official map displayed that showed only the Tawang tract as Chinese territory. In other maps, however, they have their border running along the foothills, thus including all of Arunachal.

The Chinese have based their specific claim on the territory on the premise that Tawang was administered from Lhasa, and the contiguous areas owed allegiance to the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet. Then the Chinese must also consider this. Sikkim – a vassal of Tibet till well into the 19th century – and Darjeeling were forcibly taken from it by the British! By extending this logic could they realistically stake a claim for Sikkim and Darjeeling? Of course not. It would be preposterous. History has moved on. The times have changed. For the 21st century to be stable 20th century borders must be stable, whatever be our yearnings.

At the crux of this issue is the larger question of the national identities of the two nations

and when and how they evolved. The Imperial India of the Mughals spanned from Afghanistan to Bengal but did not go very much below the Godavari in the South. The Imperial India of the British incorporated all of today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but had no Afghanistan, not for want of trying. It was the British who for the first time brought Assam into India in 1826 when they defeated Burma and formalized the annexation with the treaty of Yandabo. It was only in 1886 that the British first forayed out of the Brahmaputra valley when they sent out a punitive expedition into the Lohit valley in pursuit of marauding tribesmen who had begun raiding the new tea gardens. Apparently, the area was neither under Chinese or Tibetan control for there were no protests either from the Dalai Lama or the Chinese Amban in Lhasa. Soon the British stayed put.

Tibet remained in self-imposed isolation and the race to be first into Lhasa became the greatest challenge for explorers and adventurers in the second half of the 19th century. Not the least among these were the spies of the Survey of India, the legendary pundits. The most renowned of these was the Sarat Chandra Das whose books on Tibet are still avidly read today. As the adventurers, often military officers masquerading as explorers, began visiting Tibet, the British in India began worrying. Reports that the most well-known of Czarist Russia's military explorers,

Col. Grombchevsky was sighted in Tibet had Lord Curzon, the Governor General of India very worried and in 1903 he decided to send a military expedition into Tibet led by Grombchevsky's old antagonist, Col. Francis Younghusband. A brigade-strong mixed force of Gurkhas and Tommies went over the Nathu La into the Chumbi valley and advanced unhindered till Shigatse (Xigaze). A Tibetan military force met them there but offered what can only be described as passive resistance. Not a shot was fired back as the British Indian troops rained bullets on them. It was a forerunner to Jallianwalla Bagh. From Shigatse, Younghusband made a leisurely march into Lhasa. The British got the Tibetans to agree to end their isolation and having extracted trade concessions withdrew in 1904, taking the same way back.

In 1907, Britain and Russia formally agreed that it was in their interests to leave Tibet "in that state of isolation from which, till recently, she has shown no intention to depart." It may be of interest to the reader to know that the Great Game nevertheless continued. In 1907, Col. Mannerheim, then of the Russian Army, later Field Marshal Mannerheim and first President of Finland, led a horseback

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expedition from Kyrgyzstan to Harbin in China's northeast to identify a route for the cavalry.

The next important year was 1913 when

the Tibetans declared independence after the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a Republic in China under Sun Yat-sen. The Tibetans attacked the Chinese garrisons in Tibet and drove them

into India over the Nathu La. Also in 1913, the British convened the Simla Conference to demarcate the India-Tibet border and proposed the 1914 McMahon Line, as we know it. While the Tibetans accepted it, the Chinese Amban initialed the agreement under protest. However, his protest seemed mostly about the British negotiating directly with Tibet as a sovereign state and not over the McMahon Line as such.

Later in 1935, at the insistence of Sir Olaf Caroe of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), then Deputy Secretary in the Foreign Department, the McMahon Line was notified. In 1944, J P Mills, ICS established British Indian administration in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), but excluding Tawang which continued to be administered by the Lhasa-appointed head lama at Tawang despite the fact that it lay well below the McMahon Line. This was largely because Henry Twynam, the Governor of Assam lost his nerve and did not want to provoke the Tibetans. In 1947, the present Dalai Lama sent the newly independent India a note laying claim to some districts in NEFA/Arunachal.

On 7 October 1950, the Chinese attacked the Tibetans at seven places on their frontier and made known their intention of reasserting control over all of Tibet. As if in response on 16 February 1951, Major Relangnao 'Bob' Khating of the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS) raised the India tricolor in Tawang and took over the administration of the tract. The point of this narration is to bring home the fact that India's claim over Arunachal Pradesh does not rest on any great historical tradition or cultural affinity. We are there because the British went there. But then the Chinese have no basis whatsoever to stake a claim either, besides a few dreamy cartographic enlargements of the notion of China among some of the hangers-on in the

Qing emperor's court. The important thing now is that India has been there for over a hundred years and that settles the issue.

Arunachal Pradesh has a very interesting population mix. Only less than 10 per cent of its population is Tibetan. Indo-Mongoloid tribes account for 68 per cent of the population. The rest are migrants from Nagaland and Assam. As far as religious affinities go Hindus are the biggest group with 37 per cent, followed by 36 per cent animists, 13 per cent Buddhists. Recent census figures suggest a spurt in Christianity, possibly induced by pocketbook proselytizing. In all there are 21 major tribal groups and over 100 ethnically distinct sub-groupings, speaking over 50 distinct languages and dialects. The population of about a million is spread out over 17 towns and 3649 villages. With the exception of a few villages of Monpas who live north of the McMahon Line, it is an ethnically compact and contiguous area. In fact in future boundary negotiations could India make a case for the inclusion of the few Monpa villages left behind north of the McMahon Line? Many knowledgeable observers suggest that the area south of the Zangbo/Brahmaputra from the Pemako gorge till it enters the Subansiri division of Arunachal would be a logical boundary as the raging and hence un-fordable and unbridgeable river ensures hardly any Chinese administrative presence in the area.

It is true that historically India never had a direct border with Tibet till the British took Kumaon and Garhwal from Nepal in 1846 and extended its domain over Arunachal in 1886. On the other hand, the formidable Himalayas were always culturally a part of India and formed a natural barrier against ingress from the north, whether Tibetan or Chinese. But the times have changed and technology and mankind's great engineering

powers now make it possible for even the most hostile terrain to be subjugated. The Himalayas are no longer the barrier they once were. As China and India emerge as the world's great economies and powers, can India possibly allow China a strategic trans-Himalayan space just a few miles from the plains?

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The view from the Chinese side about what exactly constitutes

China is no less confused. Apparently like the British, the Manchus who ruled China from the 17th to the early 20th century had a policy of staking claim to the lands that lay ahead of their frontiers in order to provide themselves with military buffers. In a recent article in the China Review magazine, Prof Ge Jianxiong, Director of the Institute of Chinese Historical Geography at Fudan University in Shanghai writes, "It would be a defiance of history if we claim that since the Tang Dynasty Tibet has always been a part of China - the fact that the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau subsequently became a part of the Chinese dynasties does not substantiate such a claim..." Ge also notes that prior to 1912 when the Republic of China was established the idea of China was not clearly conceptualized. Even during the late Qing period, the term China would on occasion refer to the Qing state including all the territory that fell within the boundaries of the Qing Empire. At other times, it would be taken to refer to only the eighteen interior provinces excluding Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Prof. Ge further adds that the notions of "Greater China" were based entirely on the

“one-sided views of Qing court records that were written for the court’s self-aggrandizement.” Ge criticizes those who feel that the more they exaggerate the territory of historical China the more “patriotic” they are. In this context I would like to recall a recent conversation I had with the Ambassador Sun in India. Ambassador Sun said that while he was soundly castigated in India for his unintended comment, he gained a major constituency in China. The mandarins in Beijing would do well to take heed of Prof. Ge’s advice, “If China really wishes to rise peacefully and be on solid footing in the future, we must understand the sum of our history and learn from our experiences.” The same holds true for the babus in South Block and media pundits. If we do not, then we know who will be laughing!

Note: This article was written during the author’s visit to Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan in China in June 2007.



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